Myrna

Things Couldn't Be Better

SAMUEL CLEMENS

In the 1950s, Myrna Hansen was a familiar face onscreen, perhaps most known for her roles in noir films such as *Playgirl* (1954) and *Party Girl* (1958). After being crowned Miss USA on July 15, 1953, she began her career in Hollywood under contract to Universal, where she appeared in such box-office successes as *Man Without a Star* (1955), *Francis in the Navy* (1955) and *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), and MGM. Myrna retired from acting after the cult classic *Black Caesar* (1973). She married and had two children, while occasionally appearing at various pageants. She was kind enough to speak with me regarding her career, of which she shared fond memories.

Samuel Clemens: When did you first realize you wanted to be an actress?

Myrna Hansen: Initially, I didn't have any ambitions of acting. I was a photographers' model in Chicago. After being crowned Miss Photoflash of 1953, I was awarded a walk-on role in *All American* (1953). That same year, I was crowned Miss USA. I was awarded a long-term contract with Universal Studios and some jewelry.

SC: How was your experience at Universal?

Myrna Hansen: They cast me in several movies. I was earning $200 per week. I studied acting there, as they had instructors who trained their contractees. We were taught the Stanislavski Method, which I didn't care for. I met some wonderful people there like Mara Corday, Lori Nelson, and Race Gentry. We

Hansen

were all inexperienced, but the studio had plans to build us into stars. When we weren't working or taking classes, we were attending star-studded premieres. They gave us the 5-star treatment.

SC: Why did you leave Universal?

Myrna Hansen: I spent a year with the studio before they decided not to renew my contract for cost-cutting reasons. My salary would've been $400 per week had they chosen to move forward, but they felt that was a lot to pay someone inexperienced who hadn't yet achieved any breakthrough roles. I was surprised because it was a seven-year contract, so I expected to be there a lot longer. It certainly didn't stop my career, though. Other studios were interested in signing me, and I was still modeling.

SC: Jackie Loughery (Miss USA of 1952) said that pageants are bad for acting careers because studios typecast you. Do you think that pageants are a good way of launching a career in acting?

Myrna Hansen: They are because that's how I got the exposure. Miss USA placed me in the national spotlight. I wouldn't have gone to Hollywood otherwise. When you start out in show business, studios could typecast you, but eventually studios will take you more seriously as an actress after you've proven yourself.

SC: One of your best roles was in the film noir *Party Girl*. Can you tell us about that?

Myrna Hansen: I had just landed a contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and it was the second film they cast me in. Charles Schnee lobbied for me to get that role on the condition that I gain eight pounds. It was certainly the greatest box-office success of my career. I played Joy Hampton, a showgirl from Chicago who would later die of an apparent suicide. Since my hometown is Chicago, I thought it'd be a good fit. I was never a showgirl, so I spent a day at the Moulin Rouge rehearsing with the chorus line to get an idea of the character. After the film's release, newspapers reported that I was given more dialogue in that film than my prior films combined.

SC: Do you have any interesting stories about *Party Girl*?

Myrna Hansen: We were filming a scene where my character was found dead in a tub. I was told by the director [Nicholas Ray] to remain underwater and hold my breath until he gave a signal to come back up. I held my breath underwater and waited for the signal from the director. I must've waited for 30 seconds underwater, to no avail. I came up for air and saw the director laughing at the supposed prank he pulled on me. Otherwise, it was a great experience. Cyd Charisse was wonderful to work with. She was a true professional.

SC: What was your favorite onscreen role?

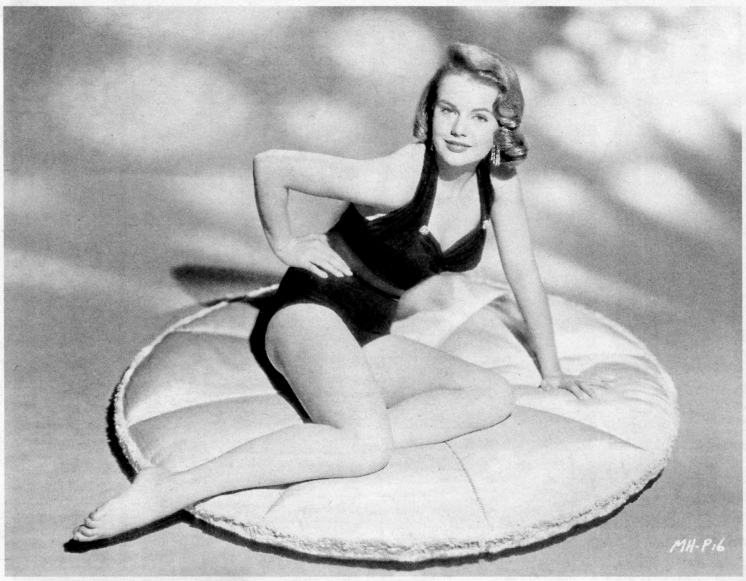
Myrna Hansen: I liked *Man Without a Star* with Kirk Douglas. I rode horses as a child, so they didn't have to train me to do that. I loved horses and had planned to study Animal Husbandry, so it was a lot of fun. It was my only non-glamorous role onscreen, as I didn't wear makeup and I dressed plainly. It was a refreshing change from being typecast as the model or the blonde. It was great working with Kirk Douglas, too. He took his work very seriously.

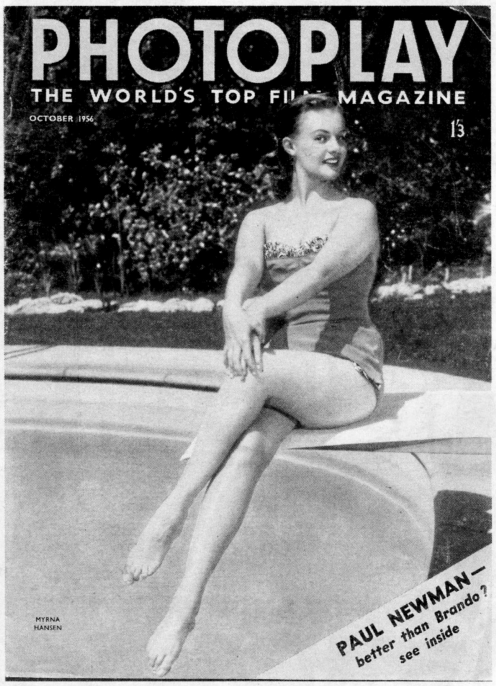
Raintree County (1957) was another one I remember fondly. It was a good role, and the studio had me do a big publicity tour to promote the film. I got to do a lot

A publicity photo of Christiane Martel, Mari Blanchard and Myrna Hansen for the movie Rails Into Laramie (1954).

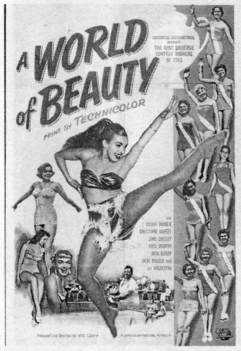
NEW LIQUID LUSTRE-CREME IS HERE!
Now you can shampoo...
Set with plain water...and have
lively, natural looking curls!
featured in
"PARTY GIRL"
FOR CURLS THAT COME EASY—HERE'S ALL YOU DO:
LUSTRE-CREME · NEVER DRIES · IT BEAUTIFIES!

Ad for Lustre-Crème Shampoo with Myrna Hansen, 1956





Posing prettily on the cover of Photoplay, October 1956.



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A U-I publicity shot of Myrna Hansen brightens a sunny May 1956 page of a European calendar.

of traveling in addition to spending several months in Kentucky where we filmed. I found out after the film's release that I wasn't given an onscreen credit. It made me somewhat regret the effort I put into promoting the film. I took about six months off after we wrapped things up; when I returned to Hollywood, MGM gave me a contract.

SC: Were there any roles that you pursued, but didn't get?

Myrna Hansen: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer considered me for several films. I tested for *Ben-Hur* (1959). The makeup artists spent hours transforming me into a leper. That film would've changed the trajectory of my career if I'd been cast… I was supposed to star in *It Started with a Kiss* (1959), but there were production delays and I eventually got out of my contract before that was even started. Another role I got was in a film called *Coed Jungle*, which was written by Lewis Meltzer. Unfortunately, they canceled that entirely.

SC: Your last film was *Black Caesar*. How did you get that role?

Myrna Hansen: I had been unofficially retired for years. Larry Cohen, who was a good friend and neighbor, asked me if I wanted a role in the film. The best thing about *Black Caesar* for me is that it helped me qualify for a Screen Actors Guild pension. I was so grateful that Larry helped me get that part.

SC: Is there anyone in Hollywood who you keep in touch with?

Myrna Hansen: I keep in touch with a lot of my colleagues, at least the ones who still live in L.A. One of the Golden Age stars who I'm good friends with is Ray Anthony. I had met him in the 1950s through [his then-wife] Mamie Van Doren when she and I were at Universal Studios together. He is 100 years old, but he's doing well. We celebrated his birthday with a nice outdoor dinner because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SC: There's been a lot of controversy regarding Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, and Harvey Weinstein and the way they pursued women in Hollywood. Did you experience this during your career?

Myrna Hansen: I can honestly say that nobody ever made a pass at me. I went to a lot of auditions, casting calls, and photoshoots, and none of the producers, photographers, and agents ever tried anything with me.

SC: Are you still affiliated with Miss USA?

Myrna Hansen: I did some appearances on *Family Feud* and *Vicki!* in the 1990s to promote the pageant. I still get invites to events. Recently, I was invited to the upcoming Miss USA pageant in Reno, Nevada. Unfortunately, they don't pay for your airfare. The pageants have changed a lot, too. I found out recently that they wear pantsuits instead of swimsuits when competing, which is odd.

SC: Would you return to acting if the opportunity arose?

Myrna Hansen (far left), Nigel Patrick, and Eva Marie Saint in Raintree County (1957).

Myrna frolicking in a racy, but clean, outdoor bathing scene.

Myna watches as Kirk Douglas (right) checks to see if William Campbell is okay in Man Without a Star (1955). Myna has one of her best roles as Campbell's love interest.

Smiling William Campbell, Jeanne Crain, Kirk Douglas, director King Vidor and Myrna Hansen are linked arm-in-arm for this publicity shot from Man without a Star (1955).

Universal Contract Lovelies: (left to right) Myrna Hansen, Mamie Van Doren, Colleen Miller and Allison Hayes, 1954

Myna plays a starlet at a party who has caught the eye of Walter Matthau in Goodbye Charlie (1964).

Myrna Hansen: If somebody reached out and offered me a role, I would consider it. I don't think I'd go and pursue roles, though. I'm content with my life. I have wonderful family and friends, and things couldn't be better.